

# Trying to understand the Lord's Prayer



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Some of my earliest memories are fidgeting on a hard pew in my family's North Seattle Presbyterian church before Sunday School, anticipating Bible story-time, craft projects and prayer practice. The most important prayer for our little minds to memorize was the "Lord's Prayer."

In a junior high Communicants Class (required for membership), a friend and I kept bringing up UFO's so the teacher allowed our lessons to wander off topic. I think she was amused by our interest in mysterious things – maybe like religion? Amid the lessons on creeds, church history and more Bible study there was an emphasis on a "personal relationship" with Jesus. The best way to nourish that relationship with the Lord was by talking to Him, especially reciting his greatest prayer.

"Pray in this way," Jesus taught his disciples, and he spoke the famous prayer (Matthew 6; Luke 11). Notice he never said, "Repeat these words; memorize them; make these exact words the most important prayer in your life and worship." And he didn't say, "Teach them to your little children."

A closer look at the words might lead us into the temptation to question the usefulness of the Lord's Prayer for our day.

I should first point out the intriguing theology that Jesus prayed at all. If he was God's only Son, they could certainly talk any time. Jesus publicly thanked his "Father" and cried out to Him in the garden and on the cross. Yet, he also taught that people should not pray in public but privately in their room. Which begs the question: Should the Lord's Prayer (Our Father) even be repeated aloud?

By the way, John 17 records the longest prayer Jesus



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said, but who took notes, and why?

"Our Father," This has established for all Christian history that God is male.

"Who art in heaven." The word for heaven is the same word for sky. We may wonder why God is in the sky and has to "come down" to earth. Many ancient cultures believed their gods were "up" in the sky, in the stars, or on a mountaintop (think of Sinai or Olympus).

"Hallowed be thy name." The name of God was always "holy" to the Jewish people, but was not spoken, so it would be unorthodox to say "Father" or pray to an image of a male deity.

"Thy kingdom come." Jesus taught that the kingdom was "within," "in your midst," so the question becomes: Where is the kingdom right now and why does it have to be transported? Was Jesus implying that a different kind of world had to arrive from somewhere else? Wasn't it here already?

"Thy will be done." This seems to be the most unnecessary phrase. Won't God's will always be done? If God doesn't want something to happen, God wouldn't allow it to happen, right? Yes, people do things that

may not be what God wants ("free will") but God "could" act to stop whatever God chooses, correct?

"On earth as it is in heaven." This may be the strangest line. People are praying that what God does in the high place in the sky will be done down here on earth. Why would God need people to ask for that?

"Give us this day our daily bread." Since this can't be about a free handout from a divine baker, we might ask how many people have prayed for daily needs to no avail?

"Forgive us our debts (trespasses) as we forgive our debtors (those who trespass)." I'm guessing this has been the hardest for believers to own. An endless cycle of transgressions and forgiveness?

"Lead us not into temptation." First, why would God do that? Second, is it our fault if we fail the test?

"Deliver us from evil." Maybe the most heart-wrenching part of the prayer. How many countless souls have prayed for protection and safety, even in churches, and they were not delivered?

"For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Not all Christians say this line. What is it for?

I said "Amen" to this prayer since childhood. I led its repetition in worship. And then I just couldn't do it any longer. I felt a little guilty and wondered what Jesus would think of someone who could no longer practice a religion of repetition? Say this prayer, end it "in His name," read this Book, believe this way? I understand that repetition and ritual is central to religious faith, but what about honesty?

As I think this through and ask questions, many would say I think too much, that prayer isn't about thinking. I understand. But couldn't that be a good reason to question repeating The Prayer – or any prayer – so regularly in our time?

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